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## Cultural Exchanges between Russia and Turkmenistan: Structure, Dynamics, and Defining Features

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### ABSTRACT

Cultural exchanges are an essential component of humanitarian interaction between countries and societies, in particular, between political partners and neighboring states whose citizens regularly communicate with each other. This paper discusses cooperation in the area of cultural exchanges between the Russian Federation and one of its Central Asian neighbors the former Soviet republic of Turkmenistan. To date, cultural exchanges and humanitarian cooperation have received very little attention in Central Asian studies, despite the attention paid to Russian-Turkmen economic cooperation and policy aspects. This paper is aimed at illuminating the modes, factors, dynamics, and defining features of the Russia-Turkmenistan cooperation in the area of cultural exchanges over the recent decade. The notions “cultural exchanges”, “humanitarian cooperation”, and “cooperation in the area of cultural exchanges” are explored in Russian-Turkmen diplomatic documents and the legislation of the Commonwealth of Independent States. The author has studied such sources as diplomatic documents, interviews, newsletters of state institutions and non-governmental organizations, and news archives of Russian and Turkmen media.

### KEYWORDS

Russia, Turkmenistan, humanitarian cooperation, cultural exchanges, “soft power”

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## Introduction

Humanitarian cooperation – namely, cooperation in cultural exchanges, education, science, media, sport, tourism, and youth policy, according to the agreement between the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (Agreement on Humanitarian Cooperation, 2005) – has become an integral part of Russia's relations with other post-Soviet countries. It has also become an essential tool of policy coordination and integration in post-Soviet space (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2005). Cultural exchanges, usually including those in art, concerts, cinema, theatre, libraries and book fairs, are an essential component of humanitarian cooperation, insofar as they can contribute to better mutual understanding and an increase in overall attractiveness of the respective countries' policies. This humanitarian cooperation is often regarded as a tool of "soft power". According to the concept of "soft power", the cultural appeal of a state results in the increase of its political impact, and is thus regarded as an important factor for international communication (Nye, 2004, 2008; Nye & Goldsmith, 2011; Nye, Jisi, Rosecrance, & Guoliang, 2009).

This paper discusses the cultural cooperation between the Russian Federation and one of its Central Asian neighbors, the former Soviet republic of Turkmenistan. The research is aimed at defining the modes, factors, dynamics, and specific features of this bilateral cultural exchange in recent decade. The study of this area of interstate cooperation is informative in several aspects: it can illuminate the symmetry as well as asymmetry of cultural communication, it can identify the practices of "soft power" between the partner states, and, finally, it can contribute to building forecasts and better evaluating the relationship as a whole.

Turkmenistan is a quite special case because of the unique character of its political regime. In Central Asian studies, Turkmenistan is usually viewed as having a strong continuity in "authoritarian" governance (Gyene, 2016; Horák, 2017; Maerz, 2016; Polese, Ó Beacháin, & Horák, 2017; Troitsky, 2014; Zabortseva, 2018). It has also been described as an "autocracy" (Basora, 2012) or a "totalitarian" regime (Kubicek, 2013). Beyond strongly influencing the internal politics of the state, this characteristic has also had direct impact on the state's interaction with the rest of the world. Turkmenistan is known for being an exceptionally closed state. For example, no Turkmen university, theatre, or library has an open website. In addition, the state does not welcome the arrival of foreign researchers planning to conduct field investigations in politics or sociology, refusing to issue visa invitations. In fact, for a foreigner, it is even impossible to visit Turkmenistan, unless you are a member of a state delegation, a celebrity on an agreed tour, a visiting researcher having a fixed purpose (e.g., a member of Russian-Turkmen archaeological expedition, or an officially appointed speaker at a conference), a businessperson officially invited for negotiations, or a member of an organized group of tourists with a strictly fixed route.

Consequently, an analysis and evaluation of cultural exchanges with a "closed" state and society like Turkmenistan is challenging, but at the same time a matter of high academic interest. This paper is based on an analysis of diplomatic documents,

interviews with Turkmen migrants to Russia, newsletters of state institutions and of non-state organizations, and news archives of Russian and Turkmen media. The latter was possible thanks to the fact that the leading news agencies in Turkmenistan – such as TDH<sup>1</sup>, Orient<sup>2</sup> and others – have open websites in Turkmen, Russian, and usually English as well. Apart from the interviews of Turkmen migrants to Russia, it turned out to be impossible to get any statements directly from Turkmenistan on this topic, as the possibility of regular communication with the outer world via the Internet for Turkmen citizens is limited.

### Legislative Framework

Since the collapse of the USSR, Russia and Turkmenistan have signed a number of bilateral documents, defining the cultural area of their cooperation. The importance of cultural cooperation and the obligation to develop cultural ties are fixed in the Russian-Turkmen treaties of 2002 (Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, 2002) and 2017 (Treaty on Strategic Partnership, 2017), and in the detailed way the cultural area is referred to in the 1995 intergovernmental agreement on the cooperation in the field of culture, education, and science (Agreement between the Government, 1995). According to this document, both countries agreed on access to the cultural heritage of both countries, free and equal cultural development for expatriate communities, delegation exchanges, festivals, tours, exhibitions, film festivals, literature exchanges, ties between libraries, and cooperation between artists, publishing houses, and cultural foundations.

The Russian-Turkmen bilateral agreement differs considerably from Russia's similar documents with other Central Asian partners such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. In Russian-Turkmen agreement, laconic phrases prevail, with minimal specifics added; furthermore, the structure of cooperation is far less detailed. Moreover, there is a relatively limited set of obligations that are mostly reducible to simple cooperation. Based on comparison with Russia's other Central Asian partnerships one can conclude that this is because of Turkmenistan's closed status and firm opposition to broader exchanges.

In addition, in 2017 the Russian and Turkmen Ministries of Culture signed a program of bilateral cooperation for 2018–2020. The new program included the same areas of exchange: cinematography, theatre, literature, and art (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2017a). Lastly, it is important to note that Turkmenistan is extremely centralized. Although it defines itself “democratic”, nearly all power lies with the president, and no decisions or deals can be made with foreign partners without a thorough evaluation by the government.

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<sup>1</sup> The state news agency of Turkmenistan – Turkmenistan today. <https://tdh.gov.tm/en/>

<sup>2</sup> Orient – Information agency “Media-Turkmen”. <https://orient.tm/en/>

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## Cultural Exchanges between State Organizations

The cultural cooperation between Russia and Turkmenistan is mainly carried out by state organizations controlled by the respective governments such as museums, theatres, and concert agencies. The first type of interstate cultural exchange to note are the “Days of Culture”. This event is organized annually on a reciprocal basis. In 2010, Moscow and St. Petersburg celebrated the “Days of Turkmen Culture” in Russia with the concerts by Turkmen musicians, a presentation of an anthology of the works of the famous Turkmen poet Mollanepes, and an exhibition of Turkmen applied and decorative art (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2017g). In 2011, the Astrakhan region of Russia – that is geographically closest to Turkmenistan – organized its “Days of Culture” in the Turkmen capital Ashgabat and in the city of Mary. This program included the performance of Astrakhan singers and dancers, a concert by the philharmonic orchestra, and exhibitions of paintings, *Palekh* decorative art, and photography (Krylov, 2011). In 2013, the Russian state agency tasked with maintaining cultural ties with foreign partners and Russian expatriates – the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (*Rossotrudnichestvo*) organized the “Days of Russian Language” in Turkmenistan, offering lessons and seminars for teachers of Russian language from Turkmen schools, a conference for philologists, and a reading contest for schoolchildren (Romanova, 2013).

In 2013, 2014, and 2015, Turkmenistan celebrated a film festival, which screened the most popular Soviet and Russian films (Dni “Mosfil’ma”, 2015). In 2016, the “Days of Turkmen Culture” were organized in both Moscow and Vladimir by Turkmen authorities and the Russian state concert agency “Rosconcert”. The program included concerts by Turkmen musicians, singers, and dancers, meetings with Turkmen writers and poets, and an exhibition of Turkmen applied and decorative art (Kovalevsky, 2016). The contents of the “Days of Turkmen Culture” in Russia in 2018 was similar (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2018e). In 2017, “The Days of Russian Culture” were conducted in Turkmenistan, including the performances of the Igor Moiseyev State Academic Ensemble, a lesson for the students of Turkmen State Institute of Culture, a photography exhibition titled *The Nature of the Russian North*, and film screenings (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2017b). The years of 2018 (V turkmenskoy stolitse, 2018) and 2019 (Dni rossiyskogo kinematografa, 2019) were also marked by the “Days of Russian Cinema” in Turkmenistan, which included film presentations and meetings with directors and actors. In addition, in 2019 the “Days of Turkmen Culture” were organized in St. Petersburg (Serdar Azmun, 2019) and in Tatarstan (Letopis’ 2019 goda, 2020).

Besides the “Days of Culture,” more examples of exchanges between state cultural organizations can be cited. As a rule, they are organized with the help of both the Russian and Turkmen embassies and “Rossotrudnichestvo”. In 2017, the Russian State Museum of Oriental Art and the Turkmen Museum of Art held a joint exhibition of Turkmen paintings in Moscow (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of

the Russian Federation, 2017c). The same year, the A. A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum held a personal exhibition of Turkmen and Russian artist Berdiguly Amansahatov (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2017q). In addition, that year the Russian Central Museum of Cinema organized an exhibition dedicated to the famous Soviet film *Beloe solntse pustunu* ("White Sun of the Desert") in Turkmenistan (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2017f). In 2018, the Moscow State Conservatory celebrated Turkmen musicians at a concert dedicated to the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the world known Turkmen composer Nury Khalmamedov (Kovalevsky, 2018), and the Moscow House of Artists – with the help of the Russian Ministry of Culture – organized an exhibition of paintings by artists from post-Soviet countries, including Turkmenistan (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2018a). In 2019, the Ashgabat Russian Drama Theatre toured in Volgograd (Grechukhina, 2019) and the famous Russian pianist Yuri Bogdanov visited Ashgabat (Letopis' 2019 goda, 2020). In addition, the Russian State Museum of Oriental Art presented an exhibition "Splendid Margiana" on the history of the Margiana archaeological expedition, which involved the cooperation of Russian and Turkmen archaeologists and art restoration experts (Letopis' 2019 goda, 2020). In the beginning of 2020, the famous Russian cellist and rector of the St. Petersburg State Conservatory, Alexey Vasiliev (Embassy of the Russian Federation in Turkmenistan, 2020b), as well as a leading opera singer from the Mariinsky Theatre Tsvetana Omelchuk (Embassy of the Russian Federation in Turkmenistan, 2020a) gave concerts in Ashgabat. Also, at the beginning of 2020 the Institute of Material Culture (IMC) of the Russian Academy of Sciences presented a 3D copy of a sacrificial altar – which had been found in Turkmen Republic by Russian archaeologists in Soviet times and carefully preserved by IMC up to present days – to the Turkmen Museum of Art as a gift (Tsinkler, 2020).

In addition, Turkmen artists and musicians regularly take part in international contests, culture festivals, art symposiums, and exhibitions held in Russia. For example, in 2015 Turkmen artists took part in the art symposium titled "Great Silk Road" in Yelabuga (Federal Agency for Tourism of the Russian Federation, 2015). In 2017, Turkmen artists took part in the festival of modern art titled *Territoriya* in Moscow (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2017d), the culture festival *Caspian Sea – the Shores of Friendship* in Makhachkala (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2017i), and the art symposium *Ceremonies and traditions* in Yelabuga (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2017h). Moreover, young Turkmen musicians participated in a festival in Astrakhan (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2017j). In 2018, Turkmen artists took part in a festival of art and design in Cheboksary (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2018f) and an art symposium in Yelabuga (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2018c), while Turkmen composers participated in an All-Russian composing contest with international participation (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2018d). In 2019, Turkmen composers took part in the Winter Festival of Art in Sochi (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture

of the Russian Federation, 2019b). Turkmen masters of applied and decorative art also participated in an international exhibition in Makhachkala (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2019f) and Turkmen cultural studies scholars visited as guests at a conference on decorative art in Derbent (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2019e).

Russian artists and musicians are also sometimes invited to festivals, national holidays, and contests organized by Turkmen cultural institutions. For example, in 2012, ethnic pop band *Argymak* participated in a music festival in the Turkmen city of Avaza (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2017l). In 2013, several Russian pop bands and singers were invited to take part in a gala concert for the All-Turkmen Week of Culture, which also coincided with the celebrations of President Berdymukhammedov's birthday (Volkova, 2013). In 2019, Russian pop stars participated in a concert at a Caspian Economic Forum in Avaza (Prezident Turkmenistana, 2019) and Russian theatres were presented at an international theatrical festival in Ashgabat (V turkmenskoy stolitse, 2019). In addition, every year Ashgabat holds an international book fair in which Russian authors and publishing houses are represented by the Russian Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communications (Rospechat') (Erusalimsky, 2012; Rossiyskie knigi, 2017).

It should be noted, that in Russia, even in "official" exchanges between state organizations, Turkmen culture is often represented through the efforts of local enthusiasts interested in oriental art and art research. For example, the State Museum of Oriental Art regularly organizes exhibitions and lectures dedicated to Central Asian art (including Turkmen art) and to Turkmen art in particular (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2017e, 2017n, 2019a). Besides events in Moscow, some museums and cultural centers in Russian regions also from time to time present exhibitions and cultural program dedicated to international friendship which sometimes include Turkmen art and traditions. In recent years, such events took place in 2017 in the Krylov museum in the city of Tula (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2017k), in an art gallery in the city of Nefteyugansk (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2017m), in a Tula Art Gallery (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2017o), in Voronezh State Regional Museum of Art (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2017r), and in Orenburg State Regional Museum of Art (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2017p). In 2018, Turkmen culture – among others – was presented at an exhibition *Culture Has No Borders* in the Chuchkovo State Library in the Ryazan region (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2018b). In 2019, a young artist from Turkmenistan, L. Kulova, was invited to take part in a collective exhibition in Tambov Regional Art Gallery (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2019g). In 2014, the Agency for Archives of Astrakhan region opened access to its online collection of archival documents on the cooperation between Russia and other Caspian states, including Turkmenistan (Otkryta virtual'naya, 2014). Russian archaeologist Natalia Solovieva (Tsinkler, 2020), who is also head a Russian-Turkmen archaeological expedition,

and I. Golubnichy (Kustov, 2014b), who is the chief editor of the newspaper *Moscow Writer*, were awarded the Turkmen national Magtymguly Medal for their studies and popularization of Turkmen culture.

One can explain the interest and enthusiasm of Russian activists and spectators in Turkmen culture by appealing to the common Soviet past. In addition, we can see that Turkmen culture and Turkmen art are a matter of interest for Russian experts in Oriental studies. The traditions and continuity in Russian school of Oriental studies have always been consistent, since the times of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. In a multinational and multicultural Russian society, the interest to Central Asia is persistent, as well as the readiness to communicate with other cultures and study their cultural heritage.

### Non-State Organizations in Cultural Exchanges

In addition to exchanges between state cultural institutions, there are several examples of non-state participation in Russian-Turkmen cultural cooperation. These typically include the initiatives of expatriate communities.

In Russia, there are some well-organized Turkmen expatriate communities, mostly in large cities like Moscow, St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, and others. They usually have websites or online communities in social networks, although the majority of the latter are closed to non-members. These sites report recent news of interest to the community. Moreover, these Turkmen communities also often include several cultural initiatives. For example, in 2010, the Turkmen diaspora in Ivanovo organized a concert for a local orphanage to celebrate the Day of the Turkmen flag (Ivanovo House of Nationalities, 2010). In 2012 (Griboedova, 2012) and 2014 (Zaharov, 2014), Turkmen students organized presentations of Turkmen cuisine in Barnaul. In 2014, the association *Russian-Turkmen House* and the Congress of Turkmens of Russia presented an exhibition of Turkmen painting in the Moscow House of Nationalities (Moscow House of Nationalities, 2014) and Turkmen students and diaspora members represented Turkmen culture at a festival titled "Friendship Meridian" in St. Petersburg (Kustov, 2014a). In 2017, Turkmen students from Tula State University gave a lecture on Turkmen traditions of the New Year celebrations in the local Veresaev Museum (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2017s) and musicians from the Turkmen community of Tula region took part in a concert in the local philharmonic society (Turkmenskaya diaspora primet uchastie, 2017).

In 2018, the Turkmen community of St. Petersburg organized a photo exhibition titled *Turkmenistan – the Heart of the Silk Road* (Fotovystavka o Turkmenistane, 2018). In 2019, Turkmen students from the Association of Foreign Students of Moscow State University organized a book exhibition also titled *Turkmenistan – the Heart of the Silk Road* in the library of the Russian town of Pokrov (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2019d) and in Tula Turkmen students gave more lectures on Turkmen national traditions in the Veresaev Museum (Press Office of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2019c). In addition, in



2019 Turkmen community members in St. Petersburg in cooperation with the local House of Nationalities organized an exhibition of Turkmen paintings and decorative art (Letopis' 2019 goda, 2020) and the Turkmen community of Edelbai village in the Stavropol region organized celebrations of the 295<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the famous Turkmen poet Magtymguly's birth (Turkmenskaya diaspora v Stavropol'e, 2019). In February 2020, a Turkmen student from Dagestan State Agrarian University – who is also a member of “Interdruzhba Association” (Association of International Friendship) – conducted a “lesson of friendship” dedicated to Turkmenistan, in a school in the city of Makhachkala (Charyeva, 2020). In addition, every year Turkmen communities in Russian cities organize the celebrations of *Nowruz* holiday, which are open to everyone (Turkmenskaya diaspora Moskvyy, 2011; Turkmenskaya diaspora Chuvashii, 2019).

### Russian Expatriates in Turkmenistan, Turkmen Diaspora in Russia

There is very little research and almost no mentions in either Russian or Turkmen media on Russian expatriates in Turkmenistan. The author of the present article is aware of two publications: the research by Natalia O. Matveytseva on the evolution of social and political status of Russian expatriates in the CIS countries (2007) and by the Institute of CIS country studies presenting a comparative analysis of the legal status of compatriots in post-Soviet countries (2014). Both these publications claim unsatisfactory conditions for Russian expatriates in Turkmenistan (Matveytseva, 2007; Zatulin et al., 2014). Since the 1990s, the Turkmen government has pursued a path of total “Turkmenisation” (Ivanov, 2019) that has resulted in numerous human rights violations (V Gosdume Rossii, 2020). Moreover, given the adoption of state laws that have forced people with dual citizenship either to denounce their non-Turkmen citizenship or to leave the country (Iskhod. Russkie begut, 2015), it is safe to conclude that there is no role for the Russian diaspora in Turkmenistan currently.

Thus, apart from the above-mentioned official exchanges, any other means of representation of Russian culture in Turkmenistan are hard to assess. Since Turkmenistan does not welcome field research in the social sciences and has highly regulated laws of internet, this study employed a poll of Turkmen immigrants – mainly, students and labor migrants – to collect details on Russian culture in Turkmenistan. However, even this was challenging, as the numbers of Turkmen immigrants are much less than those of other diasporas from Tajikistan or Uzbekistan. Furthermore, Turkmen migrants by-and-large prefer not to answer polls, probably fearing persecution upon their return to Turkmenistan. The author of this article was, however, able to find 40 migrants from Turkmenistan, currently living in Russia. The author achieved this with the help of online communities in the social network VK<sup>3</sup>, the help of the Moscow office of the non-commercial organization All-Russian Federation of Migrants, and thanks to local Turkmen diaspora in Yekaterinburg.

<sup>3</sup> VK (short for its original name VKontakte) is a Russian online social media and social networking service. <https://vk.com>



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Of these 40 contacts, only six agreed to answer. Even this small batch of results were curious:

I studied in “Russian” school, but didn’t get in touch with cultural exchanges with Russia. We only studied Russian literature and culture at school. There are Russians living in Turkmenistan, although much fewer, than earlier. They preserve their traditions, celebrate Christian orthodox holidays. What can be interesting in exchanges? I don’t know. Maybe, some theatrical performances on the works of famous Russian writers. It can help to visualize and feel Russia. And now there are very few Russian books in bookshops, while in 1990s there had been a lot (Guzel, 32).

I saw Easter celebrations by Russians. And I know about the Russian tradition to go to *banya* [Russian sauna]. At school we studied Russian writers. I like reality shows on Russian TV (Jeyhun, 24).

At school we studied Russian language and Russian literature. The books of Russian writers are translated into the Turkmen language, too. I like the fashion style of Russian girls (Mekan, 24).

I studied at “Russian” school. Because of this, books in Russian were accessible for me. But generally, the government is against spreading of books in other languages than Turkmen. From Russian culture, in Turkmenistan Russian literature and cuisine are popular. Can the exchanges be developed? I doubt, because in our country the government is pushing forward Turkmen culture, everything Turkmen, starting with the control of clothes in national style (Myakhri, 28).

I studied at “Russian” school. My image of Russia was formed by my mother, she is from Russia. I read Leo Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Pushkin. Talking about cultural events – I have visited some now in Russia. I want to study in Russian university in future. From Russian experience – holiday celebrations, cultural events in Russia are worth borrowing (Anonymous, 33).

I studied at “Russian” school; I speak Russian well. In Turkmenistan I had experience of visiting some cultural events, dedicated to Russia. Among Russian writers and poets, I know Pushkin, among movie stars – Boyarsky, among musicians – Kirkorov, Pugacheva and Basta. Generally, acquaintance with Russian culture helps to feel more comfortable here and understand each other with Russians better (Anonymous, 32).

What implications can be drawn from these answers?

First, the official cultural exchanges are *not* accessible for the majority of people in Turkmenistan. Otherwise, these Turkmen citizens could have at least remembered

visiting, say, some concerts of “Days of Culture” or a film festival. This does not mean the absence of the exchanges *per se*, but rather indicates their poor accessibility for Turkmen citizens not only in small cities but also in the capital.

Second, the Turkmen government is consistently carrying out a policy of total “Turkmenisation”. The promotion of national culture, national literature, national language, and national fashion would certainly seem natural, provided that this policy did not imply a strict limitation on the representation of other cultures, including those with which Turkmenistan officially “develops cooperation and cultural exchanges”.

Third, the cultural practices of Russian expatriates and “Russian” schools seem to provide more contact with Russian culture for Turkmen citizens on a regular basis than the official exchanges between state cultural institutions. Thanks to becoming acquainted with Russian expatriates’ practices and studying at “Russian” schools, locals can form their own first image of Russia and Russian cultural heritage. Even if they do not become regular visitors of official events related to Russia, their acquaintance with Russian culture can contribute to developing more open-minded and culturally receptive personalities.

## Conclusion

The study of the cultural exchanges between Russia and Turkmenistan demonstrates the following: There is an “official” exchange – between the state institutions of both countries – and there is an “informal”, or non-state exchange provided by people-to-people exchanges and the activity of expatriate communities. The former mechanisms prevail over the latter in terms of organizational structure and size. Moreover, it can be assumed that the latter would be impossible without the approval of the state institutions that facilitate the former. Therefore, we can talk about strong state control over the exchange in both countries. However, this state control should not only be regarded in a negative way. It also demonstrates the interest of governmental circles in the continuation of such exchanges.

At the same time, state control of the exchanges provides the state with control over the information about them too, and this creates a problem for the study and evaluation of these exchanges. While in Russia it is possible at least to locate and study the organizational (state and non-state) reports, as well as detailed descriptions and photos from the events, this is not possible in Turkmenistan. There is no open information about the accessibility of the events for Turkmen citizens, the number of visitors, or their reactions. Furthermore, field research in Turkmenistan is inaccessible due to the refusal of the Turkmen state to accept visitors doing research, other than fixed participation in a conference, fixed artist tour, or fixed route for a group of tourists accompanied by Turkmen guides.

The dynamics of the bilateral cultural exchanges between Russia and Turkmenistan over the recent decade can be characterized as stable. The continuation of the exchanges, despite the closed status of the Turkmen state and its “Turkmenisation” policy, testify to the sturdiness of the cooperation between the two countries. Despite its attempts, Turkmenistan cannot close its cultural space

completely. Economic communication with Russia continues thanks to large-scale events like the Caspian Forum, CIS summits, etc. And moreover, it also can be assumed that these highly controlled cultural exchanges with the outer world – including those with Russia – can probably be used positively by the Turkmen regime to avoid acquiring the image of a completely closed totalitarian country. Thus, international music festivals and book fairs continue to be organized, and international cooperation is demonstrated to the world. And while these cultural ties do not change Turkmenistan's restrictive cultural policy toward its foreign partners, the impact is still political. The events organized still create an environment of contacts, which importantly exceed political or business negotiations. Even limited as they are, the exchanges will probably contribute to Russia's image as a friendly state toward contemporary Turkmenistan.

The main factors that define the trends of bilateral cooperation are the positions of state organizations in charge of cultural exchanges, the closed status of Turkmenistan, and the above-mentioned bilateral state control over exchanges. This state control can be considered the main defining feature of Russia-Turkmenistan cultural exchanges. The second defining feature is their asymmetry. Turkmen culture in Russia has much greater opportunity to be represented, than Russian culture in Turkmenistan. This has been accomplished by the well-organized cultural initiatives of the Turkmen expatriate community in Russia. And, crucially, Russian state authorities are in favor of such pluralism of culture representations, as it corresponds to the purpose of inter-ethnic accord. This pluralism can be understood as deeply rooted in the history of the multi-national Russian Empire and multi-national Soviet Union. At the same time, Turkmen national policy limits the self-expression of non-Turkmen cultures to a minimum. This contradicts its image of “not-a-completely-closed-state,” and this is a fundamental contradiction. The cultural exchanges from the Turkmen side therefore have a dualistic nature: on the one hand, they exist and are organized. On the other hand, they are not accessible and sometimes not even known to exist for the majority of Turkmens, especially those who live outside Ashgabat and who are not in any way linked to political and cultural circles. This is also a certain asymmetry, but it is not due to the weakness of Russian “soft power,” but the external circumstances which are defined by the Turkmen regime and its sovereign national and cultural policy. Probably, given the continuity of Turkmen regime, these characteristics of the bilateral relationship will remain the same in foreseeable future. Nevertheless, “windows of opportunities” provided by cultural exchanges for people-to-people communication should be used carefully and thoughtfully to build and maintain unofficial, informal, and friendly ties between the people of these two nations.

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